The Horrors of the Church and Its Holy Inquisition

This piece was originally published at [Biblioteca Pleyades](#).

Joaquin Pinto – The Inquisition. (Credit: Wikimedia Commons / Public Domain)

> "Anyone who attempts to construe a personal view of God which conflicts with Church dogma must be burned without pity."
> – Pope Innocent III

The Inquisition was an ecclesiastical court and process of the Roman Catholic

Church setup for the purpose towards the discovery and punishment of heresy which wielded immense power and brutality in medieval and early modern times. The Inquisitions function was principally assembled to repress all heretics of rights, depriving them of their estate and assets which became subject to the ownership of the Catholic treasury, with each relentlessly sought to destroy anyone who spoke, or even thought differently to the Catholic Church. This system for close to over six centuries became the legal framework throughout most of Europe that orchestrated one of the most confound religious orders in the course of mankind.

Inquisition Procedure

At root the word Inquisition signifies as little of evil as the primitive “inquire,” or the adjective inquisitive, but as words, like persons, lose their characters by bad associations, so “Inquisition” has become infamous and hideous as the name of an executive department of the Roman Catholic Church.

All crimes and all vices are contained in this one word Inquisition. Murder, robbery, arson, outrage, torture, treachery, deceit, hypocrisy, cupidity, holiness. No other word in all languages is so hateful as this one that owes its abhorrent preeminence to its association with the Roman Church.

In the Dark Side of Christian History, Helen Ellerbe describes how the same men who had been both prosecutor and judge decided upon the sentence of heresy. Once an Inquisitor arrived to a heresy-ridden district, a 40 day period of grace was usually allowed to all who wished to confess by recanting their faith.

After this period of grace had finished, the inhabitants were then summoned to appear before the Inquisitor. Citizens accused of heresy would be woken in the dead of night, ordered, if not gagged, and then escorted to the holy edifice, or Inquisition prison for closer examination.

In 1244, the Council of Harbonne ordered that in the sentencing of heretics, no husband should be spared because of his wife, nor wife because of her husband, and no parent spared from a helpless child. Once in custody victims waited before their judge anxiously, while he pondered through the document of their accusation. During the first examination, enough of their property was likewise confiscated to cover the expenses of the preliminary investigation.

The accused would then be implicated and asked incriminating and luring questions in a dexterous manner of trickery calculated to entangle most. Many

manual's used and promulgated were by the grand inquisitor Bernardus Guidonis, the Author of Practica Inquisitionis (Practice of the Inquisition) and the Directorium Inquisitorum (Guideline for Inquisitors) completed by Nicolaus Eymerich, grand inquisitor of Aragon. These were the authoritative text-books for the use of inquisitors until the issue of Torquemada's instructions in 1483, which was an enlarged and revised *Directorium*.

A Chapter of the Manual is headed "of the torture" and contains these small reflections:

> "The torture is not an infallible method to obtain the truth; there are some men so pusillanimous that at the first twinge of pain they will confess crimes they never committed; others there are so valiant and robust that they bear the most cruel torments. Those who have once been placed upon the rack suffer it with great courage, because their limbs accommodate themselves to it with facility or resist with force; others with charms and spells render themselves insensible, and will die before they will confess anything."

The author gives further directions:

> "When sentence of torture has been given, and while the executioner is preparing to apply it, the inquisitor and the grave persons who assist him should make fresh attempts to persuade the accused to confess the truth; the executioners and their assistants, while stripping him, should affect uneasiness, haste, and sadness, endeavoring thus to instill fear into his mind; and when he is stripped naked the inquisitors should take him aside, exhorting him to confess, and promising him his life upon condition of his doing so, provided that he is not a relapsed (one dilated a second time), because in such a case they cannot promise him that."

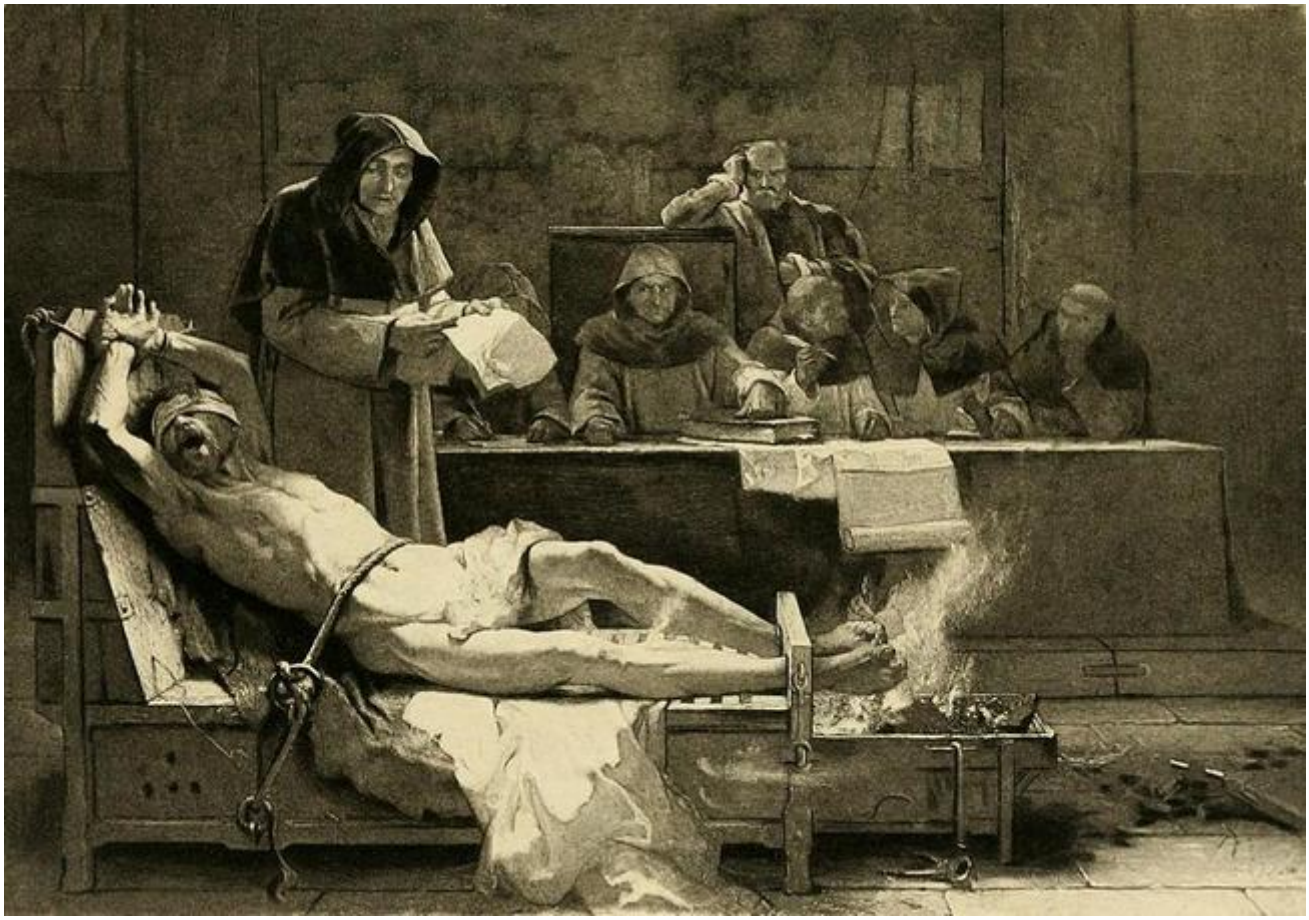
Later afterwards in the sixteenth century, Cardinal Giovanni Caraffa, a zealot for the purity of Catholicism who later became the pope himself, also held a stern and gloomy view of moral rectitude for heretics. In 1542, he was appointed by pope Paul III to administer the Inquisition.

The manuscript life of Caraffa gives the following rules drawn up by Caraffa himself:

> “Firstly when the faith is in question, there must be no delay; but at the slightest suspicion, rigorous measures must be resorted to with all speed. Secondly, no consideration is to be shown to any prince or prelate, however high his station. Thirdly, extreme severity is rather to be exercised against those who attempt to shield themselves under the protection of any potentate, and fourthly, no man must lower himself by showing toleration toward heretics of any kind.”

Refusing to confess at the first hearing, saw heretics being remanded to the prisons for several months. The dungeons were situated underground, so that the outcries of the subject might not reach other parts of the building. In some medieval cells, the inauspicious were bound in stocks or chains, unable to move about and forced to sleep standing up or on the ground. In some cases there was no light or ventilation, inmates were generally starved and kept in solitary confinement in the dark and allowed no contact with the outside world, including that of their own family.

In 1252, Pope Innocent IV officially authorized the creation of the horrifying Inquisition torture chambers. It also included anew perpetual imprisonment or death at the stake without the bishops consent. Acquittal of the accused was now virtually impossible. Thus, with a license granted by the pope himself, Inquisitors were free to explore the depths of horror and cruelty. Dressed as black-robed fiends with black cowls over their heads, Inquisitors could extract confessions from just about anyone. The Inquisition invented every conceivable devise to inflict pain by slowly dismembering and dislocating the body.



(Credit: Shutterstock)

Many of the devices were inscribed with the motto “Glory be only to God.” Bernardus Guidonis, the Inquisitor in Toulouse instructed the layman as to never argue with the unbeliever, but as to “thrust his sword into the man’s belly as far as it will go.” George Ryley Scott describes how the inquisitors, gorged with their inhumanity, and developed a degree of callousness rarely rivaled in the annals of civilization, with the ecclesiastical authorities condemning every faith outside of Christianity as demonic.

Even the very fact of having a charge brought against you, and of being summoned to the Inquisition was sufficient to strike abject terror into the bravest man or woman. For very few who entered the doors of that halls of torment emerged whole in mind and body. If they escaped with their life, they were, with rare exceptions, maimed, physically or mentally forever. Those who did happen to endure the dungeons generally went mad in captivity, screaming out in despair to escape their purgatories. Others willingly committed suicide during their confinement.

The defendants were known to incriminate themselves at any chance they had to escape the horrors. As Henry Charles Lea describes, one of the conditions of

escaping the penalties was that they stated all they knew of other heretics and apostates, under the general terror, there was little hesitation in denouncing not only friends and acquaintances, but the nearest and dearest kindred–parents, children, brothers and sisters–this ultimately and indefinitely prolonged the Inquisitions through their associates.

In the ages of faith, when the priest, was little less than a God himself, a curse from his lips was often more feared than physical torments. To even establish an accusation against a bishop itself required 72 witnesses; against a deacon was 27; against an inferior dignitary was 7, and for non-members of the clergy, 2 was sufficient to convict. Whole communities went mad with grief and fear of the thought towards being denounced to the Inquisition. It spread all over Europe. Men, women, and children, all legally murdered on evidence by a church, which today would only be accepted unless the court and jury specifically composed of the inmates of a lunatic asylum.

During the course, defendants had no rights to counsel or advice, and were even denied the right to know the names of their accusers. No favorable evidence or character witnesses were permitted. In any case, one who even spoke for an accused heretic would be arrested as an accomplice. Never would a prisoner of the Inquisition have seen the accusation against himself, or any other. All efforts relating to time, place, and person were carefully concealed.

Henry Charles Lea describes however that evidence was accepted from witnesses who could not legally testify in any other kind of trial; such as condemned criminals, other heretics, or children even as young as the age of two. The Inquisitor Jean Bodin (1529-96) author of De La Demonomanie des Sorciers (Of the Demonomania of Witches) especially valued child witnesses for extracting confessions, as they were easily persuaded to confess. Children though, were no exception for being prosecuted and tortured themselves. The treatment of witches' children was particularly brutal.

Suspicion alone of witchcraft would warrant torture. Once a girl was nine and a half, and a boy was ten and a half, they were both liable to inquiry. Younger children below this age were still nevertheless tortured to elicit testimonies that could be used against their own parents. A famous French magistrate was known to have regretted his leniency when, instead of having young children accused of witchcraft burned, he had only sentenced them to be flogged while they watched their parents burn.

The children of those parents murdered usually were forced to beg in vain upon the streets, for no one dared feed or shelter them thus incurring a suspicion of heresy upon themselves. The suspicion was sufficient enough to drive away even the closest kindred and friends of the unfortunate. Sympathy for them would be interpreted as sympathy with their heresy.

The pulley or strappado was the first torture of the Inquisition usually applied. Executioners would hoist the victim up to the ceiling using a rope with their hands tied securely behind their back. They were then suspended about six feet from the floor. In this position, heavy iron weights, usually amounting to about 45 kg, were attached to their feet. The executioners would then pull on the rope, then suddenly allowing it to slack causing the victim to fall.

The rapid descent would then come to an abrupt stop, bewildering every joint and nerve in the system. In most cases it entailed dislocation. This process was repeated again and again heavier and more intense until the culprit confessed or became unconscious. Christian Monks would stand by to record any confessions, with even records today displaying the transformation of the monks steady handwriting to vigorous shaking after they recanted inside the dungeons.

If a relapsed heretic refused to recant and endure the torture, the contumacious sufferer was then carried to the scaffold and his body bound to a wooden cross. There the executioner, with a bar of iron, would break each leg and arm in two places and the heretic was left to die. If the heretic was slow to expire, the executioner would then partake to strangulation, and their body was bound to a stake and burnt outside.

Papal Inquisition (1233)

At the close of the 12th century, heresy was spreading rapidly in Southern France. Papal legates were sent by Pope Innocent III into the disaffected district to increase the severity of repressive measures against the Waldenses. In 1200, Peter of Castelnau was made associate inquisitor for Southern France. The powers of the papal legates were increased so as to bring non-compliant bishops within the net. Diego, bishops of Osma, and Dominec came onto the scene. In 1206, Peter and Raoul went as spies among the Albigenses.

Count Raymond of Toulouse abased himself in 1207, before Peter promised to extirpate the heretics he had defended. Dominec advised a crusade against the Albigenses. The pope’s inquisitors tried, condemned, and punished offenders

inflicting the death penalty itself with the concurrence of the civil powers.

The Inquisition was also destined to become a permanent institution. The vigor and success of the Papal Legatine Inquisition assured this. The Fourth Lateran Council took the initial steps with Pope Innocent III presiding. The synodal courts were given something of the character of inquisitorial tribunals. Synods were to be held in each province annually, and violations of the Lateran canons rigorously punished.

The condemned were to be left in the hands of the secular power, and their goods were to be confiscated. The secular powers were to be admonished and induced, and, should it prove necessary, were to be compelled to the utmost of their power to exterminate all who were pointed out as heretics by the church. Any prince declining not to purge his land of heresy was to be excommunicated. If he persisted, complaint was to be made to the pope, who was then to absolve his vassals from allegiance and allow the country to be seized by Catholics who should exterminate the heretics. Those who joined in the crusade for the extermination of heretics were to have the some indulgence as the crusaders who went to the Holy Land.

In the face of this inexpugnable record, how futile it is for modern church apologists to pretend that Rome did not shed blood, and was not responsible for the atrocities of the Inquisition. The Council of Toulouse in 1229 adopted a number of canons tending to give permanent character to the Inquisition as an institution.

It made or indicated the machinery for questioning, convicting, and punishing. Heretics were to be excluded from medical practice; the houses in which they were found to be razed to the ground; they were to be delivered to the archbishop, or local authorities; forfeiture or public rights could be removed only by a papal dispensation; any one who allowed a heretic to remain in his country, or who shielded him in the slightest degree, would lose his land, personal property, and official position; the local magistracy joined in the search for heretics; men from the ages of 14, and women from 12, were to make oath and renew it every two years, that they would inform on heretics.

This made every person above those ages a bloodhound to track to torture and kill. Local councils added to these regulations, always in the direction of severity and injustice. The organic development of the Papal Inquisition proceeded rapidly. It was found that bishops, for the various reasons, would not always enforce the cruel canons of the councils.

So Pope Gregory IX in August, 1231, put the Inquisition under the control of the Dominicans, an order especially created for the defense of the church against heresy. Dominican inquisitors were appointed for Aragon, Germany, Austria, Lombardy, and Southern France.

The chronicle of the inquisitor Guilhem Pelhisso shows the most tragic episodes of the reign of terror which wasted Languedoc in France for a century. Guillaume Arnaud, Peter Cella, Bernard of Caux, Jean de St Pierre, Nicholas of Abbeville, Foulques de St Georges, were all the chief inquisitors who played the part of absolute dictatorship, burning at the stake, attacking both the living and the dead.

One of the leading head Inquisitors of Germany was Conrad of Marburg. Stern in temper and narrow in mind, his bigotry was said to be ardent to the pitch of near insanity. Conrad was urged by Pope Gregory IX as to “not to punish the wicked, but as to hurt the innocence with fear.” History shows us how far these Inquisitors answered to this ideal. Conrad murdered and terrified countless people in pursuit of his duties, regarding mental and physical torture as a rapid route to salvation. He was given full discretionary powers, and was not required to hear the cases, but to pronounce judgment, which was to be final and without appeal-justice to those suspect of heresy.

He was authorized to command the aid of the secular arm, to excommunicate protectors of heresy, and to lay interdict on whole districts. During his reign, he claimed to have uncovered nests of “Devil worshippers” and adopted the motto “I would gladly burn a hundred innocent if there was one guilty among them.” Stimulated by this shining example, many Dominicans and Franciscans merged with him, and became his eager assistants. He also sentenced the feline cat to be forever viewed as a tool of manifestation for witches and sorcerers.

During the persecution of heresy in the Rhineland’s by Conrad, one obstinate culprit actually refused to burn in spite of all the efforts of his zealous executioners. A thoughtful priest brought to the roaring pile a consecrated host. This at once dissolved the spell by a mightier magic, and the luckless heretic was speedily reduced to ashes.

Other inquisitors included Peter of Verona in Italy, Robert the Bulgar in northeast France, and Bernardus Guidonis in Toulouse. Guidonis, was considered the most experienced inquisitor of his day, condemning roughly 900 heretics, with recorded sentences pronounced after death against 89 persons during a period of 15 years. Not only was their property confiscated and their heirs disinherited, but they were

subject to still further penalties. In the north of France, the Inquisition was marked by a series of melancholy events. Robert le Bougre, spent six years going through the Nivernais, Burgundy, Flanders and Champagne, burning at the stake in every place unfortunates whom he condemned without judgment.

Spanish Inquisition (1478-1834)

In 1478, the Spanish Inquisition was established with the papal approval of Pope Sixtus IV. The reform and extension of the ancient tribunal which had existed from the thirteenth century was mainly to discover and eliminate Jews and Muslims secretly taking up their beliefs in private.

The conduct of this holy office greatly weakened the power and diminished the population of Spain. It was considered the most deadliest and notorious of all Inquisitions, as firstly being, it was the most highly organized and secondly, it was far more exposed and open with the death penalty than that of the papal Inquisition. This holy office became veiled by secrecy, unhesitatingly kept back, falsified, concealed, and forged the reports of thousands of trials.

The first two Inquisitors in the districts of Seville were appointed in 1480 by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella to round up the most wealthiest heretics; the reason for this, was that the property of those accused, were shared equally between the Catholic throne and the Dominicans.

The Catholic Spanish government also directly paid the expenses, and received the net income of the Inquisition itself from the accused. According to civil law, people convicted of religious treason were sentenced to death and their goods confiscated while the Catholic Church feasted on their estate. Additional Inquisitors were named, including Tomas Torquemada, who the following year was appointed Inquisitor General for all of Spain.

Tomas, who’s duty was to organize the rules of inquisitorial procedures in Seville, Castille and Aragon. He believed punishment of heretics was the only way to achieve political and religious unity in Spain. Those refusing to accept Catholicism where lead to the stake and burnt alive in a procession and Catholic ceremony known as “auto-de-fe'” (act of faith).

Roman Inquisition (1542-1700)

In the early 1500’s and 1600’s, the Catholic Church went through a reformation. It consisted of two related movements:

(1) a defensive reaction against the Reformation, a movement begun by Martin Luther in 1517 that gave birth to Protestantism
(2) a Catholic reform which saw Protestants declare war on Catholics

The Roman Catholic Church called the Council of Trent partly as a defense against Protestantism. In 1542, Pope Paul III (1534-49) established the Holy Office as the final court of appeal in trials of heresy. The Church also published a list of books that were forbidden to read. Heretical books were outlawed, and searched out by domiciliary visits. Every book that came was scrutinized minutely with the express object of finding some passage which might be interpreted as being against the principles or interests of the Catholic faith.

The secular coadjutor were also not allowed to learn to read or write without permission. No man was able to aspire to any rank above that of which he already holded. The church insisted on this regulation as a means to obtaining a perfect knowledge of its subordinates.

The censorship of books took three forms:

(1) complete condemnation and suppression
(2) the expunging of certain objectionable passages or parts
(3) the correction of sentences or the deletion of specific words as mentioned

A list of the various books condemned upon any of these three heads was printed every year, after which anyone found to be in the possession of a volume coming under section (1) or an unexpurgated or uncorrected copy of a volume coming under section (2) or (3) was deemed guilty and liable to serve punishment. The author and the publisher of any such book often spent the remainder of their lives in the dungeons of the Inquisition. Its overall goal was to eradicate Protestant influences in Europe.

A number of wars resulting from religious conflicts broke out as well as the Catholic governments tried to stop the spread of Protestantism in the country. Such attempts led to the civil war in France from 1562 to 1598 and a rebellion in the Netherlands between 1565 and 1648. Religion was a major issue in the fighting between Spain and England from 1585 to 1604.

It was also a cause of the Thirty Years' War 1618 to 1648, which centered in Germany, that eventually involved all of the great nations of Europe halving its population. The estimate of the death toll during the Inquisitions ranged worldwide from 600,000 to as high in the millions covering a span of almost six centuries.

Victor Hugo estimated the number of the victims of the Inquisition at five million, it is said, and certainly the number was much greater than that if we take into account, as we should, the wives and husbands, the parents and children, the brothers and sisters, and other relatives of those tortured and slaughtered by the priestly institution. To these millions should properly be added the others killed in the wars precipitated in the attempt to fasten the Inquisition upon the people of various countries, as the Netherlands and Germany.

Be sure to ‘like’ us on Facebook

Original Link:
https://churchandstate.org.uk/2016/04/the-horrors-of-the-church-and-its-holy-inquisition/